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In romance as we read and as we hear in geste written orality in the medieval "Short story" : the verse romances of the 13th & 14th centuries

John Ford

I. Introduction

1 While the Middle English verse romance is not usually thought of as a short story in the contemporary sense of the term, consideration of this narrative form is appropriate for several reasons when examining the use of orality in short fiction. Judging from a strictly historical perspective, the verse romances are directly linked with the medieval French *nouvelles*, which are themselves considered early forerunners of the short story. In fact, as the very title of this conference demonstrates, the term *nouvelle* is still retained in French as the translation for the genre known as "short fiction" in English, and indeed, the French equivalent of the English verse romance is also frequently referred to as a *nouvelle*. In practical terms, the verse romance also stood in relation to the medieval epics and chronicles in much the same way that the modern short story stands in relation to the novel: it is shorter, more concise, and one should be able to get through it easily in one sitting. Finally, and perhaps most pertinently, the Middle English verse romances were composed at a time when English was re-establishing itself as a suitable language for serious literary composition after being supplanted in this role for several centuries by French and Latin. Within a generation of the Norman Conquest, English had largely ceased to be used for such purposes, though English-speaking scops, bards and minstrels continued to elaborate old tales and develop new ones in memorized recitations before various audiences. It furthermore appears that most of the extant verse romances must have circulated orally in some form for a considerable time before being preserved in

writing. It is therefore not surprising to find so many vestiges of the oral tradition in the verse romances, and an examination of these traces might prove especially useful to anyone studying the development of written literature from traditional oral sources in many cultures today.

2 Before examining these traces, however, it is important to explain precisely what aspects of orality are to be treated here. This is necessary because the conception of the term in respect to modern works is, in many ways, wholly inapplicable to the verse romances. As a result, the tack taken in considering orality in this paper will differ to some extent from that of many other papers here included. We shall first briefly explain the most usual understanding of orality and the way it is studied in modern literature, then show how this differs from the conception of orality in treating medieval literature, and finally show the evidence for orality in written form of the Middle English verse romances composed from the late 12th to the early 14th centuries.

3 In considering modern works, orality is most often understood as the use of dialect language to portray the actual speech-ways of characters in modern fiction. In such cases, the means of representing the relevant speech-ways is usually achieved in one of two ways. First, an author might employ non-standard or dialectical English words, sometimes with "conventional" phonetic spellings and abbreviations, while generally continuing to utilize standard written English. This means of representing accent and dialect is so common that it is often found in fiction not intended to represent actual speech variations in any meaningful way[1]. Although this method has the advantage of not proving too distracting to readers accustomed to standard orthography, it has the disadvantage of being limited in its effective portrayal of speech-ways. A second method is to use non-standard grammar and syntax to represent a particular dialect, often accompanied by innovative spelling to transliterate the pronunciation of a corresponding accent[2]. While this approach can be effectively used to represent a particular accent or dialect with a considerable degree of accuracy, it has the disadvantage of often proving distracting to the reader. Frequently, even readers who speak the dialect represented might complain of difficulty reading such texts, accustomed as they are to standard orthography for all sorts of speech[3]. This is especially true of works written entirely in "dialect," an increasingly common practice used most notably by some contemporary Scottish writers. In such cases, however, regularization of the non-standard spellings, grammar and syntax throughout a given work eventually prove increasingly less troublesome as the reader becomes accustomed to them. Regardless of which method is preferred, in these instances orality is conceived of as an attempt on the part of the writer to represent a speech-way that differs from the received linguistic standards in respect to grammar, syntax and pronunciation by employing non-standard written English.

4 While such aspects of orality are well worth considering, they are outwith the focus of this paper because the language used in the medieval verse romances is almost invariably a transliteration of actual speech-ways of various Middle English accents and dialectics[4]. This is because the English language was no longer standardized on the Old English West Saxon model when the romances were written, and it hadn't yet become fully standardized on the South Midland's accent and dialect of London. Since there was no prescribed linguistic standard, there was no possibility of employing non-standard language[5]. Writers naturally wrote as they spoke, and until roughly the middle of the 16th century, phonetic spelling that reflected regional speech-ways was considered normal[6].

As such, all of the romances reflect the author's own dialect and accent to a greater or lesser extent[7]; there was never a conscious attempt to vary the language in order to "infuse" it with an oral characteristic because this particular aspect of orality was invariably present in every act of writing.

5 The focus of this paper is therefore not so much the reproduction of accent or dialect in the Middle English verse romances, but rather the retention of narrative structures and turns of speech characteristic of oral recitation in the tales' written form. Of particular interest is the continued use of exhortative and occasionally emphatic discourse and direct address between a first-person narrator and a second-person audience in an otherwise third-person narrative. In a strictly oral composition with no cover to open for a beginning, no cover to shut for an end, and no chapter headings for dividing episodes, any work of significant length needs such stylised direct intercourse between a narrator and the audience in order to regulate the narrative flow. In the written medium, however, visual cues on the page can do the work of such oral "tags," as is clearly seen in modern narratives with their reliance on titles, chapter headings, even paragraph breaks and punctuation. Nevertheless, these tags were retained as conventional elements of the verse romances long after the written medium made them obsolete. This is because tradition had made them a customary aspect of narratives, much as "Once upon a time" and "They lived happily ever after" remain customary – albeit non-essential – "bookends" to open and close a traditional fairy tale. While a greater degree of variation is permitted in the verse romances, their beginnings and endings are similarly formulaic. Both draw on oral tags that would have originally been used by scops and bards to alert their audiences to the start and finish of a recitation. The beginning, sometimes prefaced by a prayerful invocation, is indicated by an exhortative opening naming the audience addressed; the ending typically consists of a prayerful closing which might exhort the deity, the audience or both. Between these bookends, oral tags also frequently appear in the form of signposting digressions that signal episodic divisions in the narrative by directing the audience's attention to a turn in development. Taken together, the bookends (consisting of exhortative openings and prayerful closing) and the signposting digressions can be thought of as opening titles, chapter headings and conclusive endings. The remainder of this paper shall examine each of these three elements in turn.

II. Exhortative Openings

Invocations & Call to Listen

6 In antiquity, it was customary to begin verse narratives by invoking the muse, asking her to give the poet the ability to tell his or her story. Homer uses such a beginning in his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as does Virgil in his *Aeneid*. While such invocations of the muse are not entirely characteristic of the verse romances as a genre, many of them do begin with a prayer to God, Christ or the Holy Trinity. Examples can be found in a significant number of the romances, including *Athelston*[8],*Sir Eglamour of Artois*[9], and *the Earl of Toulouse*[10], each of which begins with a six-line invocatory prayer. Other romances beginning with similar invocations of various lengths include *the Avowying of Arthur*, *Amis and Amiloun*, *Ywain and Gawain* and *the Sultan of Babylon*.Although considered more characteristic of romance endings than beginnings (for almost all romances close with an invocation while only

about a quarter begin with one), such dedications might nevertheless represent a continuation with early traditions.

7 After such prayerful recourse, however, the poems then generally turn to what is considered the most typical romance introduction, the exhortative opening[11]. Much as the name suggests, the author/narrator calls upon his audience to perform a particular action, namely to hear a tale. As shall be seen in numerous examples cited below, the exhortation usually begins "Hearken!" (e.g., *Havelok the Dane*, 1)or "Listen!" (e.g., *Athelston* , 7) both of which, incidentally, are often given as translations for the "Hwæt!" that opens so many Old English poems (e.g., *Beowulf* and *The Dream of the Rood*). While such an exhortation might therefore be thought of as showing a lingering influence of the Old English tradition, it is probably more accurate to say that it is characteristic of medieval tradition in general, appearing as it does in romances and their antecedents in other European languages as well.

Naming the Audience

8 The exhortations also generally identify a target audience. Given the range of targets named, it seems probable that such naming was sometimes simply a respect of convention rather than a real indication of the tales' expected recipients. This seems especially true when the romances are addressed to the high nobility or royalty. For example, *Robert of Sicily* begins: "Princes proud..." but finishes the line with: "...that be in press" (1); in other words: "among the throng"[12]. It is not likely that true princes would feel themselves so crowed into the masses, though, and given the fondness for these particular formulaic constructions throughout the poem, we can assume it is meant as hyperbolic courtesy rather than an actual address to princes. *The Earl of Toulouse*, on the other hand, is addressed to "Dear Lords[13]" (7). As today, such styling would be appropriate for all levels of the aristocracy, but given the existence of other terms of address for the lower ranks, in the thirteenth and fourteenth century it may have been considered particularly suited to the high nobility. As such, it again seems that this term of address would have been more courteous than accurate, for it is believed the romances in English would have appealed more to an emerging gentry or lesser nobility than to the established French-speaking aristocracy[14]. It is therefore perhaps not surprising to see so few romances generically addressed directly to kings, princes or lords.

9 More common still, however, are appeals to *Lordings*, an obsolete diminutive properly referring to a young lord or the son of a lord. It also seems to have been particularly suitable for the lesser nobility or gentry, but when used in the plural (as here) it is most often simply a way of saying "Sirs," or "My Masters." It is thus perhaps best thought of as a medieval equivalent of the modern "[Ladies and] Gentlemen." This seems to be the signification of its use in numerous romances, including *Sir Orfeo* ("But hearken, Lordings, that be true"; 23)[15], *Sir Cleges* ("Listen, Lordings, and you shall hear"; 1)[16], and *Athelston* (Listen, Lordings, that be hende"; 7.)[17]. Just to underscore the point, the same title of address occurs in *Sir Degaré* (1)[18], *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* (1)[19], and *Bevis of Hampton* (1)[20]. Although this list of occurrences is far from exhaustive, it seems that in all such cases the audience is more accurately identified; it is therefore not terribly surprising that there are more romances addressed to this segment of society than there are of those addressed to the higher nobility, or indeed, any other social group.

10 It likewise appears to be the case that the lesser nobility or gentry are indicated when certain genteel adjectives are provided in place of titles. *The Siege of Milan* for example, is addressed simply to:"All worthy men" (1)[21]. In order to be worthy, however, one would have to have not only a certain social standing, but also a certain bearing appropriate to that status. The adjective *worthy* was frequently found in conjunction with the titles *lord*, *lady*, *lording* and *gentleman*, and it can be assumed that its usage without a specific title makes an indirect reference to individuals of such degree. A similar term that is frequently found in the romances is: *hende*; though obsolete today, it was a very common Middle English masculine adjective that embraced a range of meanings, including: "noble," "gracious," "worthy," "courteous" and even "handsome." While social custom dictated that a peasant or yeoman could not be *hende* no matter how well-mannered he might be, the term could be correctly applied to any man with at least the rank of a gentleman so long as his demeanour proved him to be well-bred (though by implication, perhaps not the most well-born). It thus again seems to be the lesser nobility and gentry who are addressed in numerous tales using these adjectives in their opening address, including *Amis and Amiloun* ("All that be hende, hearken to me"; 2)[22], and *Sir Isumbras* ("Hende in hall, you will hear of elders that were before us"; 1-2)[23]. Again, such usage would accord well with what is known to have been the probable audience of the Middle English verse romances.

11 Still other romances use even more familiar terms of address. *Sir Perceval of Galles* is addressed simply to "Friends" or "My Dears" (1)[24]. While still courteous, this style of address indicates a social parity between the compositor and his probable audience. The author of *Sir Eglamour* likewise keeps the familiar tone but dispenses with formal courtesies by addressing the story to an unqualified "you" (7)[25]. *King Horn* also has a simple "you," saying anyone who listens to his song will be "blithe"(1-3)[26]. *Gamelyn* is likewise addressed simply to "you" (2)[27], and is furthermore an interesting tale because the hero is of neither royal nor noble blood, but is a member of the "country squire" level of gentry or lesser nobility. In this case, the compositor's use of "you" seems to underscore both his parity with the audience and, presumably, their mutual parity with the eponymous hero of the tale. Again, given what we know about the probable composition of the romance audience, this is actually quite appropriate.

12 It seems that the author of this late romance (after 1350) saw no reason to flatter his readers or listeners with distinguished titles or epithets, and in recognition of the respectability of their station, even provides them with a hero from their own class.

13 *Havelok*, however, a tale in which the hero is indeed a royal prince, strays in the other direction in being addressed to somewhat baser stock. The tale begins: "Hearken to me goodmen, [good]wives, maidens and all men" (1-2)[28]. The term *goodman* is, like *lording*, an archaism. It was a term of civility roughly equivalent to "mister," probably most commonly used to refer to respectable householders with a bit of land who, though somewhat better off than the local peasantry, did not quite measure up in wealth or status to a lording or gentleman. Similarly, a *goodwife* was a female of equal status to the goodman, be she married to him or not[29]. Next, although *maiden* could refer to any unmarried young woman, the term tended to be reserved for those of life's lower stations. Similarly, when unqualified by a prefixed *noble-*, *gentle-*, or *good-*, the term *man* used by itself tended to connote those of humbler origins, just as the term *wife* did for women. Thus, *Havelok* appears to be directed unequivocally to *hoi polloi*, an address which

was as mocking to the probable "middling sort" who constituted the bulk of the audience as *Robert of Sicily's* princely style was flattering[30].

14 In all likelihood this fall in status of the addressees probably doesn't indicate an actual shift it the audiences' composition, but rather a higher degree of literate involvement in the composition. Instead of flattering their audiences, the latter variations use the conventional exhortations to mock them. The possibility of this happening is much more likely through the written medium. This is because so long as the exhortations served a real heraldic purpose in calling an audience to hear a story delivered orally from memory, a measure of respect would be required. In such cases not only would it be acceptable for the performer to adapt the narrative to suit the audience, but expected, and such adaptations would be particularly anticipated in the exhortative opening address. To provide a disrespectful address in such a situation would risk having it taken in earnest rather than laughed off as a joke. Only with the advent of the written delivery – or an oral delivery drawn directly from a scrupulously followed written script – can the performer escape responsibility for the slight by blaming it on a text written to a generic audience. Modern authors, playwrights and scriptwriters for television and film are frequently able to turn this situation to comic effect in occasional jibes to the audience that are found to be humorous rather than insulting because it is patently obvious that they are indeed generic and not designed specifically for any particular audience. It seems the use of writing permitted the compositors of the verse romances to achieve a similar effect; but what is most interesting here is that they have retained a conventional element that was initially necessary in the oral environment and have adapted it to a new purpose in their written accounts where the original function is no longer needed.

Oral Announcements in Written Forms

15 Another obvious aspect of orality contained the exhortations is the announcement that the tale is to be delivered aloud. As the vast majority of the above examples demonstrate, the audience is usually requested to listen, hearken or hear. Authors also frequently write that they will "tell" the tale (e.g., *Athelston,* 10; *Havelok*, 3; etc.)or "sing" it (e.g., *Horn*, 2-3; *Bevis of Hampton*, 3, etc.). The versifiers sometimes even request the audience to "take heed" (*Earl of Toulouse*, 11)[31], or "hold your tongue!" (*Gamelyn*, 169)[32], presumably in order to hear better. These pronouncements evidently evolved from the pleas of minstrels and bards for silence before reciting tales in crowded halls in the days when oral delivery was the norm. Evidence to support such a link with the bardic tradition is not hard to find in the romances themselves. *Emaré*, for example, begins by talking of wandering minstrels:

> Minstrels that walk far and wide,
> Here and there in every a side,
> In many a diverse land,
> Should, at their beginning,
> Speak of that upstanding king (1-5)[33].

16 Likewise, one can almost hear the voice of the bard in the opening lines of *Amis and Amiloun*, when the narrative voice alludes to the task of weaving the heroes' names into its rhymes:

> The children's names, I promise you,
> I will work correctly into rhyme
> And tell in my discourse (37-39)[34].

17 While statements such as these do indeed suggest a link with an earlier oral tradition, that does not detract from the fact that all of the surviving tales are the product of a literate society. The very plot of *Athelston*, for example, hangs on deceit practiced through letter writing, and its four main protagonists meet in their youth while serving as letter-carrying messengers[35]. Not only that, but throughout the narrative the author maintains that the source for his story was found "written in a book" (21)[36],a claim that has actually sent scholars hunting for a written source. Even *King Horn*, arguably the oldest romance, refers to writing at least three times (938, 939, 1011)[37]. Furthermore, while it is likely that some of the stories were occasionally recited or performed, it is equally probable that they were frequently the focus of more solitary reading[38]. Thus, as with the mocking forms of address, it stands to reason that romance writers did not intend their exhortations to be taken literally, but rather that they had simply become a traditional way for introducing a story.

18 Further evidence for this point of view comes from the frequent allusions in the romances themselves to their being found in writing. The maker of *Sir Launfal*, for example, acknowledges that the tale is found "in romance as we read" (741)[39]. The identical expression is found in numerous other romances, including *Sir Isumbras* (759), the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* (2636), and *Athelston*, where it occurs at least four times (383, 569, 623, 779)[40]. In *Amis and Amiloun* it occurs twice (27, 2448), but this tale also has four variations of the formula: "In geste as we so read" (144)[41], "In book as we so read" (447)[42], "It is a great sorrow to read in geste" (1546)[43], and "Thus in geste we read" (1729)[44]. Additional variants occur in *Sir Isumbras* (501)[45], *Horn Childe and Maiden Rimnild* (1119)[46], *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (51)[47], and *Sir Gowther* (470, 543)[48]; and this list is far from exhaustive. In fact, references to reading or finding information in romances or in gestes are so common that they are considered indispensable items in the inventory of common romance formulae, and this particular formula (including its variants) is one of the most common. But since the romances evidently do live up to their claims of being written, then their claims of being told and sung must be taken with a grain of salt. It is again likely that such references are simply vestiges of a time when minstrels did sing the tales, and the turns of phrase became so intricately linked with the genre that the oral tags were kept long after the shift from orality to writing. Indeed, it even seems probable that the numerous formulae referring to writing – clear indications that the romances as we have them were the product of a literate culture – originated as variations of these oral tags[49].

19 Evidence for the shift from the oral to the written tradition can actually be found in some romances that refer to both in the same lines. *Sir Orfeo* and *Lay le Freine*, for example, both begin: "We read often and find written, as clerks well know, the lays that were sung to the harp" (1-3)[50]. What is even more interesting is the apparent fact that being found in writing is what makes the tales "official." To paraphrase *Ywain and Gawain*, "by writing words down, men make the stories true and stable" (37)[51]. This gives the clear impression that a narrative needs to exist in writing if it is to be considered creditable. It is the written form that gives it "auctorité," the legitimate authority to be considered a real tale, and not simply a fanciful hearsay of the presenter[52]. However, despite the claims of *Athelston* and some other romances to a written source, the numerous nods to orality couched in them make it certain that the ultimate source of these tales and the genre itself is undoubtedly dependent to some extent on the oral tradition.

III. Signposting

20 Now as many of the above examples demonstrate, not all mention of listening or hearing appears at the beginning of a tale. Often enough, the audience is also directly addressed elsewhere in the narrative, particularly when the author wants to recap one episode before beginning a new one. Again, such a convention would be especially important in oral deliveries where the audience only has recourse to the spoken word for digesting and regulating the narrative. As we have mentioned, in the written medium such signalling is largely superfluous; thus, the fact that oral tags are retained in the verse romances is indicative of the influence of the oral tradition on this genre of written literature. The tale of *Amis and Amiloun* serves as a good example of this technique in practice. In addition to oral tags at the story's opening, there are numerous points where the narrator addresses the audience as "you" or delivers an imperative. These tags can take various forms, but, as the following examples demonstrate, their formulaic character and their regulatory function in turning from one episode to another make them easily recognizable.

21 The first example is the turn from the one-line invocatory prayer to the beginning of the narrative proper with the announcement: "All that be hende, hearken to me / I pray you, *par amour*" (2-3)[53]. The next 20 lines, corresponding to the rest of the first stanza and all but the last line of the second, provide a very general overview of the story to be recounted. This description functions very much like the blurb found on the back of a paperback. It gives just enough detail to whet the audience's interest without giving away the whole story. It says that the tale is one about two aristocratic youths born overseas, that they become friends as children while serving in a court, and that they are eventually knighted and swear lifelong friendship. The hook is the mention that theirs is a story of joy and great sorrow, the details of which are to follow. It is at that point, just before the narrator launches into the first episode, that the second exhortation comes: "Hearken, and you may here!" (24)[54].

22 The following section then recounts how the youths are born in Lombardy on the same day, how they are identical though unrelated, and how at the age of eight they both end up living in the court of a powerful duke who agrees to ensure their education and eventually to knight them. Much stress is laid on the nobility of their appearance and character, the great love that the duke has for them and the goodwill they receive from all and sundry – details that will later lead to jealousy and their woe. Also emphasized is the remarkable bond of friendship between the two and the vow of brotherhood they swear to each other – a pact of true friendship that will ultimately prove the source of their salvation. Once this section is completed the narrator is able to open the next, which is done by again addressing the audience in the first line of the fourteenth stanza, with: "Thus in geste as you may here"(157)[55]. It is at this point that the narrator goes into the second part of the heroes' lives, telling how they are knighted at fifteen and given offices in the duke's court.

23 In this second section, we learn of the animosity the duke's chief butler bears Amis and Amiloun due to their general popularity but most especially because of the duke's love for them. As soon as it is established that he is forever plotting their downfall, news arrives that Sir Amiloun's parent have died and that he must return to his own lands to take up his inheritance. Much is made over the strain the pair feel over their imminent

separation, for Sir Amis must remain behind because the duke cannot bear to part with them both. However, Amis is allowed to accompany his friend until evening on the first day of his journey, and as they set out for the ride the episode ends with: "Hende, hearken, it cannot be denied: They were such doughty knights who rode out of town in that moment" (280-82)[56].

24 The next exhortation is particularly noteworthy because it is a unique turn of phrasecreated specifically for this narrative. After riding out for most of the day, the heroes stop, descend from their horses, and with much weeping renew their vows of eternal and exclusive friendship, symbolized by an exchange of the identical golden cups. Amiloun rides off and it is said that he took control of his homeland and married a lovely maiden. Then, at the beginning of the 28th stanza, the narrator signals a change of direction in the plot by stating: "Now let us leave Amiloun alone with his wife in his country, God grant that he fare well, and we shall talk of Amis" (337-40)[57]. After this point there is no more mention of Amiloun for several hundred lines, the narrative focusing exclusively on Amis and his tribulations in the court. What is interesting, however, is that this turn in direction is signposted by a construction that bears the imprint of both the written and the oral tradition. By using an original and unique turn of phrase, the author avoids using one of the traditional formulae drawn from the fund of stock phrases that are usually found at such turning points. This is highly characteristic of the written tradition where authors have time to think about exactly what they want to say and tailor it to the needs of their particular narrative. However, although the turn of phrase selected is not a commonplace formula with the usual mnemonic usefulness, it remains characteristically oral in the direct address of the narrative voice to the audience.

25 Most turns, however, do tend to use formulaic tags. When there is a shift in scene from Sir Amis wandering in the garden to the sickbed of the duke's daughter, it is signalled at the beginning of stanza 42 by the formula: "Now, hende, hearken, and you may here how [it was] that the duke's dear daughter lay sick in her bed" (517-19)[58]. This same formula is later used at the beginning of stanza 100 when Sir Amiloun returns to the duke's court to battle the steward in place of his friend: "Now, hende, hearken, and I shall say how [it was] that Sir Amiloun went his way" (1189-90)[59]. Likewise, the familiar tag "In geste as you may here" is used two more times, once at line 1917, when the leprous Amiloun's servant Amoraunt is seen at Amis's court, and once at 2355, when Amis enters a chapel to pray for guidance in the dilemma of trading his children's lives for that of his friend[60]. Not surprisingly, variations are numerous. "So in a time, as we tell in geste" is used at the beginning of stanza 33 when introducing a feast scene (411)[61]. Stanza 126 introduces Amis's return to the duke's court after a period of hiding with: "All thus, in geste as we say" (1501)[62]. Stanza 128 ends a description of Amis's rise in fortune by saying: "In geste as it is told," right before turning to describe how Amiloun contracts leprosy and enters a period of decline (1536)[63]. In some instances this particular formula is even adapted to incorporate the act of reading. The variation "In geste as so we read" occurs at the end of the twelfth stanza when turning from a description of the young heroes to their mutual pledge of fidelity (144)[64]. Other tags to end descriptions include "As each one of you have heard" (2484) to close an episode at the end of stanza 207, and the ambiguous: "In geste as we find" (2196) at the end of stanza 183[65]. Many other examples exist as well, but in all cases an essentially oral tag has been retained in a written version of the tales where it continues to serve as a signpost to the audience.

26 Perhaps what is most interesting is not only that these tags have been retained, but that they have remained an integral part of the narrative form. They are expected elements whose omission would be more disconcerting to a medieval audience than their seemingly superfluous presence. Furthermore, it is striking how well they are integrated into the written tradition. We have earlier said that the signposting function of these formulaic oral tags could easily be met by the *mise-en-page*, such as paragraph breaks or chapter headings. Such visual cues are indeed present in *Amis and Amiloun*, one of the twelve-line tale-rhyme poems whose individual stanzas are clearly delineated on the page by a line break after every 12 lines. As will be noted in the examples cited above, the tags tend to fall either at the very end or the very beginning of a stanza. This phenomenon is not limited to *Amis and Amiloun*. In *Gamelyn*, repetition of the exhortative opening, "List and listen and hearken" (with some variants) has led to the traditional division of the poem into six fitts, each focusing on a different episode. These separate fitts are usually indicated by the *mise-en-page* in modern editions, but such divisions are *not* so divided in the manuscript. In this case, not only has the regulatory function of the traditionally oral tag been retained in the narrative, but it has even informed the printed versions produced for a modern audience more at ease with the written tradition.

27 It is important to emphasize that such patterns are not limited to these two tales, but that they are characteristic of the verse romances as whole. As the examples have shown, these tags can terminate one episode, open another, or even do both at the same time. The most common tags are those whose formulaic quality lend them a mnemonic facility and situational versatility that allows them to be used in a variety of circumstances, but highly idiosyncratic constructions can also be adapted to serve the specific needs of a particular romance, or even an particular episode in a romance. In all cases, however, the tags signal a turn in the narrative, and it seems that even those which are peculiar to a certain romance or situation function in a similar way to those that are highly formulaic and exceedingly versatile. They help to direct the narrative flow and regulate its course, much as the original tags from which they derive did in the orally circulating tales from which the verse romances developed.

IV. Prayerful Closing

28 Seeing that elements of orality are present in the beginning of the romances and all along their unfolding, it is hardly surprising to find that they also play a role in the tales' endings. This traditionally takes the form of a closing prayer, reminiscent of the invocatory message found at the opening of some romances. However, although such invocations to the deity only sometimes begin a romance, the end of a tale is almost always signalled by a closing prayer. And while these prayers do share common characteristics and serve a common function, their individual structure and precise aims can and do vary, as the following examples shall demonstrate.

29 Frequently, the narrator cleverly intertwines the prayer with events in the story. *The Squire of Low Degree*, for example, ends by recounting the return of noble companions to their homelands, the marriage of the hero to his beloved, their happiness in their subsequent long reign, and presumably their dignified death, for the romance concludes: "In all my wanderings I never saw two other such lovers: therefore blessed may their souls be, amen, amen, for charity!" (1128-30)[66]. *Amis and Amiloun* varies the ending by having the heroes renounce their wives and their lands before going on a pilgrimage and

finally founding an abbey in their homeland. Nevertheless, the final prayer is still neatly tied into their story, for they are said to have died on the same day, to have been buried together, and then: "for their truth and goodness, the bliss of heaven they have as a reward, which lasts forevermore" (2506-8)[67]. Both of these examples show the common custom of concluding the tale on a happy note for the protagonists – essentially the medieval equivalent of the modern fairy tale's "happily ever after."

30 While such a blessing on the central characters is fairly common, there are also instances where the prayer is either a curse or an invocation for divine punishment. The first nine lines of the last stanza of *Athelston*, for example, recount the gruesome execution of the Earl of Dover for treason. After being dragged through the streets of London by five horses he is hanged in a conspicuous spot where his body is left to rot unburied. Then the final three lines of this stanza – and thus the closing lines of the poem – read: "Now Jesus, that is heaven's king, never let a traitor a better ending, but [give] such a judgment for death"(810-11)[68]. Although a petition for punishment as opposed to an extolment for reward, such a request still conforms to the general pattern of the final prayer being an acknowledgment of the divine judgment meted out to characters of the story.

31 Elsewhere, however, the prayer was simply an entreaty for a universal blessing entirely unrelated to the events of the story. *King Horn*, for example, ends: "Jesus, that is heaven's king, may he give us all his sweet blessing" (1543-44)[69]. *Emaré* concludes: "Jesus, sitting in your throne, grant that we might dwell with you in perpetual glory; Amen" (1033-5)[70]. *Sir Orfeo* ends simply with a one-line invocation: "God grant us all well to fare! Amen!" (604)[71] . Similar prayers are also found at the conclusion of numerous other romances, including *Sir Launfal*[72],*Sir Isumbras*[73], and *Sir Gowther*[74]. In fact, since this is probably the easiest sort of prayer to use because it is the most versatile, it is not surprising to discover it at the end of so many of the romances.

32 A particularly noteworthy parting prayer is found in *Sir Owein*, which ends: "Now God, for Seynt Owain's love, / Graunt ous Heven blis above / Bifor His swete face! Amen" (1186-8). This finish is remarkable because although it is tied directly into the tale with mention of the eponymous hero, the actual structure of the formula would allow the insertion of just about any appellation. "Owein" could be replaced with any two-syllable name; "Saint" could be replaced with "Sir"; the two words together could be replaced with a three-syllable name, title, epithet or combination thereof. This is therefore an excellent example of the sorts of formulae preferred by oral composers in that it is easily memorized and at the ready while always permitting the insertion of specific details to tailor it to a particular situation. Here, however, it is used in a written tale, thus providing another example of how the oral tradition affects the development of the corpus of written literature.

33 Finally, while such requests for a universal blessing on the poet, the audience and mankind in general are most common, the compositor of *Havelok*, takes advantage of the occasion to request a special prayer for himself:

> Therefore I would beseech you
> Who have now heard my rhyme,
> That each of you, with good will,
> Quietly say an Our Father
> For he who has made the rhyme,
> And thus stayed awake many a night,
> So that Jesus Christ bring his soul
> Before his Father at the end of his days (2994-3001)[75].

34 Given his rather cheeky address to "goodmen, goodwomen, maidens and all men" in the tale's opening, one might very well wonder if this poet's request is not actually an irreverent joke. Such speculation is particularly merited when one considers that, generally speaking, these concluding prayers are probably not meant to be taken any more seriously than the exhortations at the beginning of the tales or in the bookmarks that occur periodically throughout them. In reality, the prayers seem to serve as nothing more than an indication that the tale is over, the medieval romance's equivalent to a modern film's ending credits. And as if to drive the point home, most of them then end with a capital "EXPLICIT" "FINIS" or "AMEN," thus providing a visual effect on the manuscript page that has all the finality of a cinematic "THE END" on the big screen.

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35 Overall, however, it seems that neither the audience named in the exhortations nor the actual directives provide throughout the narrative or at its end were necessarily meant to be taken entirely seriously. Though they may have indeed evolved from aspects of oral recitation, it appears that by the time the Middle English verse romances came into vogue, these nods to orality were most likely stylised forms that were simply fixed and expected. In this respect they remained important attributes of the genre, if no longer absolutely essential elements. Since the original need for the formulae was greatly diminished with the shift from the oral to the written tradition, authors were often able to use the tags ironically to inject humour into their works. But despite their apparent redundancy, to some extent they continued to aid in regulating the narrative flow of a tale. Many were even updated to reflect the new situation by making direct reference to writing in tags that served identical functions as those that continued to refer to listening and hearing. Furthermore, the tags themselves aided composers, and more recently, modern editors in selecting points of episodic division in their own written version or printed editions. Thus, regardless of the composition of the audience or whether the tale was being read, recited or performed, the tags continue to function much as they did in the oral tradition. We can therefore see how orality has left its imprint on this particular genre of literature created in the written tradition, and perhaps such observations in this one instance can be used as a springboard for studies of a similar nature treating different genres in the same cultural tradition or even developments in literary traditions further afield.

NOTES

1. Examples would be the use of *ain't* or (in British English) *gotten*; likewise, the use of "dialect words" such as Southern US *y'all* ("you all") or Scottish *outwith* ("outside," "beyond") *bairn* ("child") or *greet* ("cry"). The use of abbreviation or "conventional" phonetic spellings, such as *'em* for "them" or gonna for "going to," etc. Rudyard Kipling makes use of such devices in, e.g., his poem "Tommy" (1890), l.2: 'The publican 'e up an' sez, "We serve no red-coats here."'

2. A notorious example is Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in which the author readily admits to trying to reproduce 6-7 different accents and dialects with the caveat: "I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding" (p. 3). Generally, the tale is narrated in the voice of Huck, who does use dialect, but one very close to Standard English: "You don't know me, without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer' but that ain't no matter" (p. 5). A more difficult accent is Jim's: "But Huk, dese kings o' ourn is reglar rapscallions; dat's jist what dey is" (p. 140). (Quotations taken from: Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004.) More recently, Iain Banks has used Scottish dialect in, e.g., *The Business* (1999).

3. This was a frequent complaint of Hugh MacDirmid's poetry in Lallans, and more recently, the Scots dialect represented by Irvine Welsh in *Trainspotting*. See; e.g., Ford, John. "Evolution and Devolution: An Examination of the Historical Development of Scottish English." *La Tribune Internationale des Langues Vivantes* 36 (2004): 12-23; see especially pp. 8-9.

4. There is, of course, the question of verse, which would not normally be considered a natural way of speaking. Verse is, however, highly characteristic of the oral tradition, and it is frequently in verse that the earliest examples of any culture or language's literature emerges. Cf. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in Greek (ca. 8th c. BC); the poems of Ennius (239-169 BC) and plays of Plautus (254-184 BC) and Terence (ca. 170-80 BC) in Latin; *Beowulf* (ca. AD 700-1000) and *Caedmon's Hymn* (ca. AD 7th c.) in Old English; *Canticle of Saint Eulalie* in Old French (ca. AD 9th c.). In fact, it appears to be the rise of literacy that leads to a decline in verse as society becomes increasingly less dependent on the mnemonic functionality of verse, which helps the memorization, and thus the preservation, of traditional poems, songs and stories.

5. While Old English achieved a high degree of standardization based on the dialect and accent of the capital at Winchester, this influence diminished with the arrival of a French-speaking aristocracy and administration after the Norman Conquest. When English does re-emerge, it is the London accent that becomes pre-eminent, initially through its use as the language of the royal court and its use in official writs and proclamations. This prestige is heightened when printers such as Caxton begin using the dialect for their cheap and plentiful printing of books, eventually leading to standardization on this version of English around the 16th-17th centuries.

6. See, e.g., MacMahon, M., *Basic Phonetics*. Glasgow: English Language Department of the University of Glasgow, 1997; see especially p. 3.

7. It is not the case that all manuscripts accurately reflect the accent and dialect of the original author because, to a greater or lesser degree, the texts are usually "corrupted" by the accents and dialects of the various scribes who copied them. It was therefore previously thought that only holographs were of any value for evaluating the original authors dialect, the rest of the manuscripts being more or less a *Mischsprache*. More recently this point of view has come to be something of an oversimplification, as evidenced by the use of such texts as witnesses for the compilation of LALME (*Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*). For a fuller treatment see, e.g., Smith, Jeremy. An Historical Study of English: Function, Form and Change. London: Routledge, 1996; see especially pp. 28-29.

8. *Athelston* begins thus: "Lord that is off myghtys most, / Fadyr and Sone and Holy Gost, / Bryng us out of synne / And lene us grace so for to wyrke / To love bothe God and Holy Kyrke / That we may hevene wynne." NB: Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the various Middle English verse romances cited in this paper come from the electronic versions provided online by the TEAMS Middle English Texts Project, which can be accessed at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/tmsmenu.htm.> Quotations are given in modern English translation in the body of the paper with the original Middle English text cited in the notes. For quotations provided only in the notes, only the original is given.

9. *Sir Eglamour* begins thus: "Jhesu Crist, of heven Kyng, / Graunt us all good endyng / And beld us in Hys bowre; / And gef hem joye that love to here / Of eldres that before us were / And lyved in grett antowre" (1-6).

10. *The Earl of Toulouse* (*Erle of Toulous*) begins thus: "Jhesu Cryste, yn Trynyté, / Oonly God and persons thre, / Graunt us wele to spede, / And gyf us grace so to do / That we may come thy blys unto, / On Rode as thou can blede!" (1-6).

11. To clarify, those romances that open with an invocatory prayer almost always follow it up immediately with an exhortation to the audience. Line 7 of *Athelston*, for example is "Lystnes, lordyngys, that ben hende"; line 7 of *Sir Eglamour* is "I woll you tell of a knyght"; line 7 of the *Earl of Toulouse* is: "Leve lordys, y schall you telle." Such exhortations also appear after the prayer in *Amis and Amiloun* (2), *Ywain and Gawain* (4-6), *the Sultan of Babylon* (20). The majority of exhortative openings, however, are not prefaced by an invocatory prayer.

12. Original (*Robert of Cisyle*): "Princes proude that beth in pres."

13. Original: "leve lordys" .

14. It is generally believed that the Middle English verse romances were produced for a growing English-speaking bourgeoisie in emulation of the French *chansons de geste*, lays and romances that had been popular among the French-speaking Anglo-Norman higher nobility. Particularly after the plague years, members of this emerging Anglophone middle class began to establish their importance and filter into the lower levels of the gentry and (ultimately) the nobility. They imitated the tastes of their social betters and wanted access to what they perceived of as good or courtly literature; but they wanted it in English, not French. The English verse romances therefore began to come into vogue around the end of the 12th century – which was ironically the moment when the genre was fast falling out of favour in France and among the French-speaking English upper classes.

15. Original: "Ac herkneth, **lordinges** that ben trewe."

16. Original: "Lystyns, **lordynges**, and ye schall here."

17. Original: "Lystnes, **lordyngys**, that ben hende."

18. "Lysteneth, **lordinges**, gente and fre."

19. "Lystonnyth, **lordyngus**, a lyttyll stonde."

20. "**Lordinges**, herkneth to me tale!"

21. Original: "All **werthy** men..."

22. Original: "Al that ben **hend** herkenith to me."

23. Original: "**Hende** in halle and ye wole her / Off eldres that before us wer."

24. Original: "**Lef**, lythes to me / Two wordes or thre." Lef is a word that means "dear" or "friend"; here that connotation is retained in a generic address to "everyone."

25. Original: "I woll **you** tell of a knight."

26. Original: "Alle beon he blithe / That to my song lythe! / A sang ich schal **you** singe."

27. Original: "Lithes and listneth and harkeneth aright, / And **ye** shul here of a doughty knight."

28. The original text says: "Herkneth to me, gode men - / Wives, maydnes, and alle men." The "gode" is not simply an attributive adjective, but part of a title, referring to "wives" as well as to "men," hence, "goodmen" and "goodwives."

29. Originally, the term wife simply meant "woman," a usage that lingers on today in certain other combinations such as fishwife or alewife.

30. In a similar vein, Octavian is addressed to "Greater and little, old and young" (original: "Mekyll and littill, olde and yynge"; 1).

31. Original: "Y pray yow take hede!"

32. Original: "Lytheneth, and listeneth, and holdeth your tonge."

33. Original: "Menstrelles that walken fer and wyde, / Her and ther in every a syde, / In mony a dyverse londe, / Sholde, at her bygynnyng, / Speke of that ryghtwes kyng."

34. Original: "The childrenis names, as y yow hyght, / In ryme y wol rekene ryght / And tel in my talking."

35. Letters are mentioned 11 times in the romance (ll. 14, 187, 193, 203, 206, 224, 299, 303, 364, 366, 715).

36. Original: "In book iwreten we fynde." The footnote to this line on the TEAMS edition notes that the expression is "[a] conventional phrase often repeated in the poem in variant forms, that is a probable reason scholars still seek a lost source." In all probability, this claim is as spurious as that of Geoffrey of Monmouth to a "British source" as the basis of his *Historia Regum Britanniæ* ("The History of the Kings of Britain," ca. 1136). Even in antiquity, writing had been associated with authority. In the Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for authors to "lie" by claiming a written authority to justify their work even when such a source did not exist. Many of these works would probably have had written sources (e.g., Glidas's *L'Estoire des Engles*, Wace's *Roman de la Rou*), and as Nancy Vine Durling points out, "Oral tradition can be authentic and, once it has been transcribed in a book, can contribute to authoritative history" (17). See: Durling, Nancy Vine. "Translation and Innovation in the *Roman de Brut*." *Medieval Translators and their Craft*. Ed., Jeanette Beer. Studies in Medieval Culture 25. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989. See also, Ford, John. *From Poésie to* Poetry: Remaniement and Mediaeval Techniques of French-to-English Translation of Verse Romance. University of Glasgow (unpublished doctoral thesis): 2000. See especially chapter 2, § 5.1-5.6.

37. Interestingly, the mention of writing in *King Horn* refers to a princess dictating a letter to someone who knows how to write, suggesting that she herself does not.

38. Though, to be fair, this would probably have been accompanied by a bit of mumbling and lip moving in the Middle Ages. It is widely believed that there was no truly silent reading as we have today.

39. Original: "In romaunce as we rede."

40. The only difference to be found in all these occurrences is an occasional spelling variation. *Sir Isumbras*, for example, reads "romaunse"; in the following example cited, *Amis and Amiloun* reads "reede" in line 2448 (but has the same spelling as *Sir Launfal* in line 27). In all these cases, however, the actual words are reproduced verbatim.

41. Original: "In gest as so we rede. "

42. Original: "In boke as so we rede. "

43. Original: "In gest to rede it is gret rewthe." The modern reflex of *rewthe* is *ruth*, a word meaning "pity" or "compassion." The word is not commonly found today, though its antonym, ruthless, is common enough.

44. Original: "Thus in gest rede we. "

45. "In book as men rede. "

46. "In boke aswerede." (Citation from *Horn Childe* is taken from an online text of the Auchinleck manuscript, provided by the National Museum of Scotland at: <http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/horn.html>.)

47. "In romans as men rede." ("In romance as men read. ")

48. 470: "Truly, as tho romandys seyd" ("Truly, as those romances said"); 543: "Thus this romans told" ("Thus this romance told").

49. For an examination of the use of oral-formulaic diction in the verse romances, see: Lord, Albert. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962. See also Ford, John. "Towards a New Understanding of Formulae: Prototypes and the Mental Template." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 2, 103. (2002): 205-226.

50. *Lay le Freine* (original): "We redeth oft and findeth ywrite - / And this clerkes wele it wite - / Layes that ben in harping"; *Sir Orfeo* (original): "We redeth oft and findeth y-write, / And this clerkes wele it wite, / Layes that ben in harping."

51. Original (36-37): “Men uses now another craft / With worde men makes it trew and stabil.” Scholars have consistently acknowledged that worde in this context means “writing.”

52. See endnote 39.

53. Original: “Al that ben hend herkenith to me, / I pray yow, par amoure.”

54. Original: “Herkeneth and ye mow here.”

55. Original: “Thus in gest as ye may here.”

56. Original: “Hende, herkneth! Is nought to hide, / So douhti knightes, in that tide / That ferd out of that toun.”

57. Original: “Lete we Sir Amiloun stille be / With his wiif in his cuntré - / God leve hem wele to fare.”

58. Original: “Now, hende, herkneth, and ye may here / Hou that the doukes douhter dere / Sike in hir bed lay.”

59. Original: “Now, hende, herkneth, and y schal say / Hou that Sir Amiloun went his way.”

60. 1917: “In gest as ye may here.” This formula occurs in the ninth line of the stanza, closing off the third tercet; 2355: “In gest as ye may here.” This formula occurs in the third line of the stanza, thus closing the first tercet.

61. Original: “ So in a time, as we tel in gest.”

62. Original: “Al thus, in gest as we sain.”

63. Original: “In gest as it is told.”

64. Original: “In gest as so we rede.”

65. 2484: “As ye have herd echoon”; 2196: “In gest as we finde.”

66. Original: “Far also farre as i haue gone, / Such two louers sawe i none: / Therfore blessed may theyr soules be, / Amen, Ame,; for charyté!” Since The Squire of Low Degree is not found on the TEAMS site, this quotation is translated from the edition of French and Hale, pp. 721-55. (French, Walter Hoyt and Charles Brockway Hale, eds. Middle English Metrical Romances. New York: Prentice Hall, 1930.)

67. Original: “And for her trewth and her godhede / The blisse of hevyn they have to mede, / That lasteth ever moo.”

68. Original: “Now Jesu, that is Hevene-kyng, / Leve nevere traytour have betere endyng, / But swych dome for to dye.”

69. Original: “Jesus, that is of hevene king, / Yeve us alle His swete blessing.”

70. Original: “Jhesus, that settes yn Thy trone, / So graunte us wyth The to wone / In thy perpetuall glorye! Amen.”

71. Original: “God graunt ous alle wele to fare! Amen!”

72. “Jhesus, that ys hevene kyng, / Yeve us alle Hys blessyng, / And Hys modyr Marye! / AMEN” (1042-45).

73. “Jhesu Cryst, hevene Kyng, / Geve us ay Hys blessyng / And schylde us from care” (770-71).

74. “Jesu Cryst, Goddys son, / Gyff us myght with Hym to won, / That Lord that is most of meyn. Amen” (754-6).

75. Original: “Forthi ich wolde biseken you / That haven herd the rim nu, / That ilke of you, with gode wille, / Saye a Pater Noster stille / For him that haveth the rym maked, / And ther-fore fele nihtes waked, / That Jesu Crist his soule bringe / Biforn his Fader at his endinge.”

ABSTRACTS

Bien que les romans en vers anglais des XIII^e^ et XIV^e^ siècles aient beaucoup en commun avec la nouvelle moderne, il est rare que l'on fasse le lien entre eux. La position qu'occupent les romans en vers par rapport aux plus longues épopées est comparable à la place de la nouvelle par rapport au roman moderne, et on notera que le terme français "nouvelle" peut s'appliquer à l'anglais "short story" comme à l'expression "verse romance." La romance en vers est aussi particulièrement intéressante dans l'exploration de la transition d'une tradition principalement orale à une tradition principalement écrite. Par exemple, un élément de base de la composition orale est l'utilisation du vers, et ce genre partage cette caractéristique. La composition orale se fonde également fortement sur l'utilisation des formules, souvent disposées paratactiquement, et les romances conservent ce même trait. Cependant, il est également indéniable que ces romances sont le produit d'une culture lettrée. La mise en page révèle une division visuelle des vers en un arrangement strophique ; or, ces éléments ne sont pas essentiels pour noter le vers oralement composé et ils sont donc souvent omis dans les premières transcriptions. D'ailleurs, bien que les romances en vers fassent fréquemment référence à des sources écrites et à la lecture, les formules employées pour faire ces références sont essentiellement orales dans leur composition et dans leur utilisation. En conclusion, le fait plus remarquable est peut-être la conservation de l'adresse directe exhortative et parfois du discours phatique entre la voix narrative et les auditeurs/lecteurs présumés. De tels éléments sont communs en composition orale parce qu'ils sont très utiles pour régler un récit non écrit mais ils sont évidemment moins importants dans les récits composés dans un milieu lettré qui a recours aux divisions visuelles dans la mise en page. Par exemple, quand ces éléments sont employés dans la prose moderne ils ont souvent un effet quelque peu comique ou cocasse informel, alors que c'était un élément fondamental attendu par les lecteurs/auditeurs du roman en vers. Toutefois, au cours du XIII^e^ et du XIV^e^ siècle, cette convention est finalement détournée à des fins comiques.

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